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John Steuart Curry: A Pictorial Autobiography

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John Steuart Curry: A Pictorial Autobiography

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement
for the degree of Bachelors of Arts in the **Art and Art History Department** from
The College of William and Mary

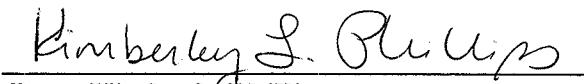
By

Kathryn Lee Swanson

Accepted for HONORS
(Honors, High Honors, Highest Honors)


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Williamsburg, VA
May 1, 2008

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Introduction

In the early 1930s, the American art movement known as Regionalism shook the American art world. Participating artists, in a bid to lessen their country's cultural dependence on Europe, began to turn to their native land for artistic subject matter. While they respected the Paris art world, their goal was to look to America rather than Europe for inspiration. They sought ways to create an art that was both meaningful and universally understood; one that both expressed indigenous tastes and represented an American school of painting. In doing so, they hoped to produce a body of work that was uniquely American.

A 1934 article by Thomas Craven in *Time* magazine connected Thomas Hart Benton, Grant Wood, Reginald Marsh, Charles Burchfield, and John Steuart Curry to the movement in that they sought to paint American subjects and the American land.¹ While various artists have, at different times, been considered Regionalists, Wood, Benton, and Curry, are commonly considered to be the "Midwestern Triumvirate of American Regionalism."² Together, these three artists created works that represented what they thought to be the essence of Midwestern life.

Although Benton was quick to point out that the term Regionalism was bestowed on them by critics and that the trio never formally created a Regionalist school,³ the artists were friends who frequently communicated, supported each other's creative endeavors, and influenced each other's art. The grouping of these three is logical in that they shared many similar experiences and goals. Wood, a native of Iowa, Benton, a Missourian, and Curry, a Kansan, were all partial to their home states and frequently painted the landscapes, people, and themes that arose from their experiences in the

Midwest. In addition, all three traveled to France at different times during their careers for training. While not outright rejecting what they saw there, they sought to “redirect what [they] had found in the art of Europe toward an art specifically representative of America” according to Benton.⁴

In terms of artistic principles, the trio agreed that the subject matter should determine the form of the painting. To them, the technical processes behind the art were of secondary importance, as the subject matter and form needed to be distinctly American in order for their works to satisfy their artistic goals. They perceived the significance and success of a work in terms of its value and meaning to the public and therefore sought to create works that were both representative of American life and meaningful to Americans who were accustomed to that life.⁵ As Benton wrote,

Let your American environment...be your source of inspiration, American public meaning your purpose, and an art will come which will represent America before the world and be acclaimed and supported by Americans as a proof that at last they are culturally on their own.⁶

There, however, the similarities ended. These three artists had reached their conclusions independently of each other and had become acquainted in the 1930s, after they had come to their own individual conclusions about how to create a modern American art. According to Benton’s personal history of Regionalism, the painters were of distinctly different temperaments and had different outlooks, especially in their opinions of the exact definition of American realism.⁷

For Benton, this new American realism meant delving into the three-dimensional space within a picture and setting up a turbulent rhythm that, to him, symbolized the turmoil of America. While he admitted that this goal could have been accomplished

through geometric forms, he was unwilling to sacrifice the narrative that represented American meaning.

Wood, who was hailed by *Time* as being the “chief philosopher” of Regionalism, considered American realism to be a national movement aimed at creating a distinctly American form of modern art.⁸ As he saw it, this art could be made understandable and appealing to a wide variety of audiences by using common American narrative themes.⁹ According to Curry, his friend saw this accessibility as a means of bringing art to the masses and letting people know that it could be enjoyed by all.¹⁰ Wood believed that by applying abstract design and utilizing modern decorative qualities in their art, regionalists would avoid being seen simply as illustrators and therefore be free to create important American art.¹¹ As Benton noted of the Iowa native’s stylistic techniques, Wood also focused on texture and color in his work, an outgrowth of his admiration of Flemish and Dutch painters. He was particularly intrigued with painting details that characterized the object being depicted, such as buttons, pockets, and text.¹²

While Benton and Wood created unique styles in order to express and emphasize their artistic goals, Curry felt the need to create faithful depictions of the subject, a traditional realist perspective that was no doubt influenced by his early career as an illustrator. While his work might be heralded as technically simpler than that of Wood and Benton, the messages he conveyed and emotions he invoked were more psychologically complex. In looking back on Regionalism’s heyday, Benton admitted that Curry came closest to the essence of Regionalism by giving the most accurate depictions of America.¹³

In discussing art in general, Curry himself repeatedly emphasized three key points that, to him, qualified this means of creative expression. The first was that art should inhabit the domain of everyday life and be motivated by genuine affection. Second, the artistic form is the object itself rather than something applied to the subject, a belief that is reflected in Curry's tendency to let subject matter dictate the style of the work. The third element of Curry's definition of art is that the artist creates his own individual guidelines of artistic excellence and should be judged solely by his individual goals.¹⁴

When discussing regionalism specifically, Curry noted, "anyone paints the things best that he understands best and those artists who are products of a certain environment should try to understand that environment."¹⁵ In keeping with his own advice, the artist frequently painted the scenes, vistas, and environment that surrounded him. When asked to paint murals on specific themes, he invariably accomplished these with a Midwest viewpoint and drew from the imagery, history, and legends of the region for his subject matter.

Curry's refusal to settle into a distinctive style, however, is perhaps one of the most important, if undervalued, elements of Curry's art. While Benton established an idiosyncratic, mannered, rhythmical style and Wood developed his signature style of epic, almost geometrically simplified figures, Curry let the object dictate his mode of depiction. For him, the subject matter was paramount and creating a characteristic general style would only serve to weaken the importance of what he was attempting to depict.¹⁶

For a painter who continually encouraged aspiring artists to "paint the thing that is most alive to him,"¹⁷ this refusal to define a style is especially fitting. In his personal life, Curry was a restless soul who was concerned about becoming stereotyped and therefore

sought out a variety of different experiences and subject matters.¹⁸ His roaming nature led him to join the circus in 1932 in an attempt to gain a new perspective on life and find new inspiration, a decision which produced a successful series of images depicting life under the Big Top.¹⁹ This same trait also drove him to move from Kansas to the East Coast in the early 1920s and back to the Midwest in 1936.²⁰

Curry's unwillingness to define himself through a specific artistic style worked in his favor early in his career, as audiences were shocked and pleased by the honest, direct approach that emphasized the narrative element of his works. As the art world began to give more priority to formal innovation, however, Curry's lack of a specific style and his tendency to focus on the objects being depicted led to a decline in his popularity among critics. Fortunately, this reevaluation of his merit was largely limited to the critics, and the support of the general public remained as many still appreciated his work and valued his artistic celebrations of America.²¹

After his death in 1946, Curry's reputation began to decline as modernist art movements such as Abstract Expressionism gained popularity. The relative neglect of his works since his death marginalized him and cast him in a lesser role than that of his two fellow Regionalists. Despite a slow shift in Curry's reputation and an increasing appreciation of his contribution to American art, the Kansas Regionalist is still overshadowed by his better known colleagues.

The majority of available resources about Curry repeats basic biographical information and proceeds to interpret the general message behind his art in a few brief sentences, neglecting to raise deeper questions about the artist or consider his works in any detail. The critical and curatorial attention that has been paid to Benton and Wood

has been withheld from Curry.²² While books such as Patricia Junker's *John Stewart Curry: Inventing the Middle West* have begun to remedy this lack of attention, much remains to be said about Curry.

In an attempt to contribute to the meager body of information available on Curry, this thesis will examine his life and the degree to which his autobiography is reflected in his art. I argue that his unsettled attitude towards style reflects a deep autobiographical element in his art. As he encountered new experiences, his art continued to grow and develop to reflect the new aspects of his life. In particular, his biography is apparent in three distinct areas of his art: his experience, his environment, and social influences.

Curry's life experiences greatly influenced his art as he found new subjects and means of expression through his encounters with the world. His time in Paris in 1926 contributed to his artistic education both through classes with the Russian artist Basil Schoukhaieff and through time he spent studying the Old Masters in the Louvre, both of which added to his understanding of how to depict mass, form, and the human figure. Stylistically, the art from this trip reveals his artistic uncertainty as he created very realistic, traditional sketches as well as abstract watercolors that resemble the works of early modern artists. In addition, his experiences under the Big Top proved to have had a significant effect on his art, as he produced innumerable sketches, lithographs and paintings during his short time with the circus.

The environment in which Curry found himself also dictated the direction of his artwork. He was impressed with the severe weather of his home state and frequently depicted the storms and floods he heard about or witnessed. According to his friend and biographer the Princeton art historian Laurence Schmeckebier, the artist's preoccupation

with storms and terrifying weather conditions corresponds to a period of depression and uncertainty in his life.²³ Upon emerging from this troublesome time and moving with his new family to Wisconsin, Curry turned his attention to the landscapes he encountered there and produced a number of powerful images depicting scenic Midwestern vistas.

In addition to depicting his experiences and environment, the social influences in Curry's life play a role in his art. Works such as *Baptism in Kansas*, *The Gospel Train*, and *Mississippi Noah* exemplify the artist's religious upbringing and reveal the impact it had on his art. Curry's association with Benton and Wood also affected his outlook and work as the three artists gradually began influencing one another over the course of their friendship.²⁴ While Curry was perhaps the least affected of the three, images such as *The Fugitive* and his designs for the Steuben Glass Company's products reveal the extent to which he was relying on and employing his friends' techniques.

In short, Curry painted that which he encountered, a tendency which is reflected in his works and relative lack of a characteristic style. This thesis will investigate the ways in which his experiences, environment, and social influences shaped his art. It will consider what Curry himself said about his life and his art as well as what critics, both the artist's contemporaries and modern scholars, have noted about him. In keeping with Curry's belief that an artist should be judged according to his or her own artistic goals, it will also attempt to analyze his works in relation to his personal standards and look at how those guidelines changed over the course of his life while also considering the way in which Curry's experiences have dictated his work and his views on art.

Chapter I: Curry's Life

John Steuart Curry led a relatively typical childhood on the family farm near Dunavant, Kansas. The oldest of Margaret and Thomas Smith Curry's five children, John was born on 14 November, 1897 and, according to him, was "raised on hard work and the Shorter Catechism."²⁵ The artist recalled to Schmeckebier that life on the farm consisted of early morning chores and, during the school year, half a day's work before riding into town on horseback for his lessons.

Like others in the area, the Currys were very religious. Both Margaret and Thomas were firm Scotch Covenanters who came from South Carolina families that arrived in Kansas during the mid 1800s.²⁶ Their devotion to religion was instrumental in their son's life, as John frequently depicted religious themes set in the Midwest in his earlier works and continued to seek out religion after leaving Kansas to pursue his artistic career.

Unlike many of their neighbors, the Currys were relatively successful and well-educated. Both of John's parents had college degrees, his father having attended the University of Kansas with William Allen White, who later became an important newspaper editor and champion of John's art. When Mr. and Mrs. Curry were married in 1895, they took advantage of their success and traveled to Europe for their honeymoon, an adventure that was seen as rash by their family and friends. In addition to being educated and able to travel, the Currys frequently spent the winter months on a ranch near Scottsdale, Arizona after 1908 due to Mrs. Curry's poor health.²⁷

It was perhaps his parents' trip to Europe that proved to have the greatest impact on the young artist, as they returned with reproductions of the art that they had enjoyed in

museums. These included works by Giovanni Bellini, Peter Paul Rubens, and a book of illustrations by Gustav Doré. From birth, Curry's artistic development was doubtless affected by being surrounded by images of masterpieces.²⁸

John's artistic inclinations did indeed start early on, as he was constantly drawing or asking others to draw for him when he was unable to adequately express himself on paper. While his father did not oppose his drawing, Thomas was less supportive than Margaret, who actively encouraged John's drawing and arranged for him to take lessons from Mrs. Alice Worswick of Oskaloosa, Kansas, who encouraged him to paint his environment. As a result, he took to tying up the family ponies behind the barn and coaxing them into posing for him in addition to depicting the storms and landscapes that surrounded his home.

In the fall of 1913, John began attending Winchester High School where, despite being a poor student, he excelled in athletics. He was particularly good at track, setting records in the 50-yard dash, 100-yard dash, and the 110-yard high hurdles. In addition to his success in these events, he was a star halfback of the football team, a sport he briefly returned to in 1919 and later through his art while working in Wisconsin.²⁹

Curry left school in 1916 upon finishing his junior year and moved to Kansas City to enter the Art Institute. Although he shared a similar background with many of the other students, he still felt out of place and left after one unhappy month.³⁰

After his sojourn in Kansas City, he joined a section gang for the Missouri Pacific Railroad in order to earn enough money to go to Chicago. Curry later recalled this period of his life as the only time when he thought something was more exciting than being an

artist.³¹ After two months, he arrived in the Windy City and enrolled in the art school of the Chicago Art Institute.

Curry stayed at the Institute for two years, studying mainly under Edward J. Timmons and John Norton.³² Letters home reveal that he felt more comfortable at the Art Institute in Chicago than he had in Kansas City and, with Timmons' encouragement, was gaining confidence in his artistic abilities.

Early in his second term in Chicago, Curry became increasingly interested in religion and attempted to reconcile his Covenanter childhood education with the new views he encountered in the city. While he frequently joined students at the Moody Bible Institute, the most influential experience for him during this period was a conversation with the Reverend Thomas McKnight of Chicago's Reformed Presbyterian Church. In a letter to his mother, Curry describes how comfortable he felt discussing religion with the Reverend and how praying with him felt genuine and sincere.³³

Curry was happy in Chicago and, in a letter home to his parents, announced his decision to study illustration at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and attempt to make a career in that field, expressing his wish to study with the famous illustrator Harvey Dunn in New Jersey.

Ever supportive, Curry's parents offered to send him to the East in order to study with Dunn. The artist rejected their proposal, although grateful that they were willing to help, and decided to spend another semester at the Institute to work on drawing and studying light and shade.³⁴ While he claimed that he needed to continue his work in Chicago before he was ready to move east, it becomes apparent in his letters that Curry was also afraid that he was not good enough for Dunn to consider advising him.

Early in 1918, Curry finished at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago and enrolled as a special student at the Scots Presbyterian Geneva College in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, where he focused primarily on football and his service as a private in the Student Army Training Corps. After the 1919 football season, however, he was determined to return to illustration and moved to Leonia, New Jersey, to work with Dunn who lived nearby in Tenafly.³⁵

Dunn proved to be a sympathetic advisor and ally. Although no longer taking students, the well-respected illustrator pointed Curry in the direction of his former students who could help him and proceeded to support and counsel the young artist. In an excited, happy letter to his mother, Curry noted that this was his golden opportunity and that Dunn promised to come and help him get set up in his own studio.

While there is no evidence to suggest that Curry ever had formal classes with Dunn during this period, the older artist had a lasting effect on his young friend's work and outlook. Perhaps the most important piece of advice Dunn gave to Curry was that an illustration was a separate, independent work of art rather than an accessory to a written story.³⁶

Despite realizing how much he needed to improve and continuing to rely on his parents for financial support, Curry was confident that he would join the ranks of the great illustrators and make a decent living within a few years. His prediction proved true by 1921 when he began publishing illustrations for magazines such as *Boy's Life*, *Saturday Evening Post*, *St. Nicholas*, and *Country Gentleman*.³⁷

On 23 January, 1923, Curry married Clara Derrick of Jamesburg, New Jersey, having met her through his brother Eugene who worked for Clara's father. After a few

months in Greenwich Village, New York, the couple settled in Westport, Connecticut where Curry bought a studio at Otter Ponds. Letters home to his parents reveal that Curry was excited about his new life and hoped to travel with Clara to Kansas during the next summer.³⁸

While he continued working as an illustrator after his move to Connecticut, Curry gradually became interested in creating museum pictures. In 1924, his oil painting *The Fence Builders* (1924, location unknown) was included in a winter exhibition of the National Academy of Design, New York.³⁹ Despite his failure to interest the press with this picture, Curry continued developing his skill as a creative artist.

It became largely apparent by 1925 that Curry had outgrown his job as an illustrator. His firm belief in Dunn's theory that an illustration should also be a good picture led him to abandon illustration and begin a career as a creative artist.

Faced with a sudden lack of income, Curry started looking for other commercial projects and was soon assisting James Daugherty in 1925 on a large mural for the Cook Travel Agency's stand in the Philadelphia Sesquicentennial Exposition. While his experiences with this mural doubtless helped him in his later mural projects, it was Daugherty's advice that he study in Europe that proved to have the most immediate impact on Curry's career.⁴⁰

Curry acted on Daugherty's advice and began searching for ways to finance a trip to Europe. In October of 1926, armed with support from friend Harry Wickey and a generous loan from Seward Prosser, John and Clara arrived in Paris so that he could study under the Russian artist Basil Schoukhaieff, as recommended by Daugherty. At Schoukhaieff's academy, Curry improved his draftsmanship and learned how to better

define form. When not at the art school, Curry took to painting watercolors in the streets of Montmartre and studying masterworks in the Louvre that he had grown up admiring.⁴¹

In addition to being exposed to the Old Masters during this trip, Curry encountered modern art through the work of such artists as Matisse and Picasso. While he admired this style of art, he also recognized that it did not fit with his artistic views and goals.⁴² “They were good” Curry admitted in an interview with the *New York Herald Tribune* in 1934, “but not good for me”.⁴³

Curry took this trip to Europe very seriously as he had borrowed large sums to get there. His hard work paid off in May of 1927 when Curry’s works were singled out in an exhibition of drawings by Schoukhaieff’s students.⁴⁴ While many of Curry’s drawings from this exhibition have been destroyed, several realistic and very detailed portraits remain. Charcoal drawings from his time with the Russian artist reveal Curry’s vast improvement in figure drawing. The characters no longer resemble the active yet relatively unsubstantial forms of his illustrations. Instead, they have become massive, flesh and blood forms with the feeling of substance underneath the skin. In all, these images reveal that Curry had followed Daugherty’s advice and learned to draw.

In June of 1927, the Currys returned to the United States via a week-long trip to London. After their arrival in America, John was commissioned to paint a set of decorative wall maps for Borning’s Travel Agency in New York and Prosser’s home in Massachusetts. Determined to continue developing what he had learned at Schoukhaieff’s academy, Curry worked with large forms, grouping them together in an attempt to create a sense of movement. He found himself still struggling to depict the human form and

began attending Dr. Stockard's lectures on the human skeleton and anatomy at the Art Student's League in New York.⁴⁵

While Curry's biographer, Laurence Schmeckebier, maintains that 1928 was a difficult year for Curry, this year marks the beginning of his breakthrough into the world of creative art as opposed to illustration.⁴⁶ In April and May of 1928, he exhibited *Steeplechaser, Auteuil* (1928, location unknown) at New York's Whitney Studio Club, which would later become the Whitney Museum of American Art. Three months later, in October, *Baptism in Kansas* (1928, Whitney Museum, New York; fig. 1) was shown at the Corcoran Gallery of Art in Washington, DC. Although his participation in the earlier show does not appear to have attracted much interest in the press, *Baptism* garnered the artist his first serious attention from New York as critics, particularly Edward Alden Jewell of the *New York Times*, wrote enthusiastic reviews about the satirical elements they found in the work.⁴⁷

The public response to *Baptism* was not fleeting, as the work was exhibited throughout the country in 1929 and remains on display in the Whitney Museum. Curry's success continued as he was notified on 2 November, 1929, at the beginning of the Great Depression, that Juliana Force had granted him \$200 a month through March of 1930 on behalf of the Whitney Museum, a generous allowance that was later extended through November of that year.⁴⁸ This New York institution proved to be among Curry's strongest supporters at this early stage as it was there that he had his first solo show early in 1930.



FIGURE 1

John Steuart Curry; *Baptism in Kansas*, 1928

Oil on Canvas; 40 x 50 in.

As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 10

Unfamiliar with scenes of life on the prairie, Curry's New York audience raved about his Midwest-centered works that they encountered at the Whitney Museum. Many critics were especially proud that he had chosen to focus on America and represent his homeland with "an admixture of realism and sentiment that distinguish [America's] native expression."⁴⁹ In short, it seemed to the public, that he had finally found an American way to depict his homeland.

Curry's sudden breakthrough into the creative art world and improved financial condition enabled him to visit Kansas again in 1930 and search for inspiration. This trip undoubtedly provided him with a wealth of material for future works. At least one

important painting, *Spring Shower* (1931, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York), resulted from his sketches of Heart Ranch, southwest of Wichita, and was purchased by the Metropolitan Museum of Art in 1932.⁵⁰

While the exact date is unclear, it was around this time that Curry met Thomas Hart Benton.⁵¹ By the mid 1920's, both of these well-known artists had reached their own, independent conclusions as to what American art should be; the similarities between their ideals led them to form a life-long friendship. When Grant Wood joined the group in 1933, the three formed an even stronger bond through frequent correspondence and visits. As Benton noted, over the course of their association, the three began influencing each other in small ways that become apparent to the astute observer.⁵²

After Curry's return to the East Coast from his visit to Kansas in 1930, he was noticed by Frederic Newlin Price, the director of the Ferargil Galleries in New York, who proposed that the artist have an exhibition at his galleries. This second solo show produced as much positive publicity as the first at the Whitney Museum, leading Manyard Walker of Ferargil to organize a traveling exhibition of Curry's works. Anxious to prove the museum's faith in him and claim the rights to sole representation of Curry's works, Walker asked Curry to consider committing exclusively to Ferargil.⁵³

In November of 1931, Curry attracted the attention of William Allen White, an influential publisher of the *Emporia (Kansas) Gazette* who, as noted above, had attended the University of Kansas with Thomas Curry, John's father. White joined Manyard Walker in promoting Curry's art and began a successful campaign to bring his works to Kansas. Through the efforts of these two supporters, Ferargil organized an exhibit of

Curry's works which opened at the Kansas City Art Institute and proceeded to travel throughout the state.

While he received favorable reviews in the press, Curry did not find the public success with Kansas audiences that he had encountered in the East. Although all accounts indicate that he was particularly sensitive to stinging reviews, he responded to this poor reception by stating, "They have Kansas. They hardly need paintings of it."⁵⁴ This initial public reaction is important, as it signifies the beginning of a series of tensions between Curry and his home state. One viewer, Mrs. Henry J Allen, the wife of a previous Kansas governor, wrote to White about her disapproval of Curry's works. Like many Kansans of the time, she felt that although he was a powerful and talented artist, the images he portrayed of Kansas were too negative and did not adequately reflect the spirit of the state.⁵⁵

Restless with his daily routine and concerned that he might become stereotyped with his now easily recognized Midwest scenes, Curry decided to accompany the circus in 1932 after completing a mural for the George Washington Centennial Exposition in Washington, DC. The three months he spent with the Ringling Brothers' Circus on their spring tour through New England provided him with a wealth of new material and artistic ideas. By 1933, he had produced enough finished works to create a show at Ferargil which was comprised entirely of his circus works.⁵⁶

In July of 1932, not long after his return from the circus, Clara, John's wife, died after suffering a long illness. Curry worked through his depression by throwing himself into his art and began teaching night school at the Cooper Union in New York as well as at the Art Students League.⁵⁷

The Ferargil's exhibition of Curry's circus paintings opened in April of 1933 and was greeted enthusiastically by press and public alike. The first show of its kind in America, *An Exhibition of Paintings of the Circus by John Steuart Curry* opened just as the circus came to New York, enabling Curry to show his circus friends the fruits of his work and how their performances had inspired him.⁵⁸

After the Ferargil's opening of his Circus show, Curry traveled to the Midwest in order to help open exhibits in Kansas as well as visit family and friends. Perhaps most importantly, Curry visited Grant Wood in early July and taught at the Iowan's Stone City Colony and Art School for a week prior to visiting his family.⁵⁹ While Curry would not move back to the Midwest for another three years, visits to Wood and Benton indicate that the trio was working closely together as early as 1933 and were doubtless beginning to influence each other's works.

The year 1934 proved to be an eventful one for Curry both personally and professionally. On 2 June, 1934, Curry married English-born Kathleen Gould Shepherd, a friend from Westport. In marrying Kathleen, Curry also gained a step-daughter, Ellen Shepherd Curry, whom he later adopted.⁶⁰ Curry's second wife proved to be an encouraging and devoted partner who provided him with perceptive advice and managed the social element of his job as artist-in-residence when the family moved to the University of Wisconsin in Madison.⁶¹ Her interest in and support of Curry's work can be seen in her role as publicist and promoter after Curry's death as she donated his works, papers, and memorabilia to major museums throughout the country.

Early in 1934, he began working on his first and only frescoes, a pair for Bedford Junior High School entitled *Comedy* and *Tragedy* which featured characters common to

American life of the 1930s including Charlie Chaplin, circus performers, Hamlet, characters from *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and even the artist and his new wife.

Curry had by this time attracted enough public attention through commissions and nationwide shows to be associated with other well-known American artists and was deemed a “Regionalist” along with Benton, Wood, Reginald Marsh, and Charles Burchfield.⁶²

With the support of a new family and bright prospects, Curry launched another solo exhibition in 1935 at Ferargil which attracted a great deal of positive press. In February of that year, the Kansas State Agricultural College in Manhattan became the first public Kansas institution to purchase one of Curry's works when it acquired *Sun Dogs* (1935, Beach Museum of Art, Manhattan, Kansas) by public subscription.⁶³

Further proof of his success came just two months later when the U.S. Department of the Treasury's Section of Painting and Sculpture announced that Curry was one of eleven painters and two sculptors chosen to decorate the interior of the new Department of Justice building in Washington, DC on “What Law Has Done for Man.” This achievement was marred, however, when the artist's initial design of “Freeing the Slaves” was rejected due to the committee's fear of controversy over the proposed image and, perhaps, Curry's strong, public interest in civil rights. Although he submitted several revisions in an attempt to appease the concerned officials, he ultimately abandoned the idea with the understanding that he would not be able to alter the image more without compromising the original idea. Consequently, Curry was forced to settle for *Westward Movement: Justice of the Plains* (1936, US Department of Justice Building, Washington, DC) and *Law versus Mob Rule* (1937, US Department of Justice Building, Washington,

DC), although he returned to his “Freeing the Slaves” idea in 1942 for his mural in the University of Wisconsin’s Law School Library.⁶⁴

Later in 1935, Manyard Walker informed Curry that he was leaving Ferargil in order to launch his own gallery and requested that Curry sign a contract with him. While the artist eventually agreed to Walker’s proposal and the two continued to work together for another six years, this arrangement ultimately did not please Curry, and he took steps to end it in 1941.⁶⁵

In 1936, Walker and Wood began campaigning to get a teaching position for Curry in the Midwest. As Walker explained to Dr. Mark Nesbit of Madison, Wisconsin, Curry wanted to return, however he was concerned about trying to make a living in the Midwest, a problem that friends such as Walker, Wood, Benton, and Thomas Craven sought to remedy. Consequently, Wood approached University of Wisconsin President Glenn Frank and Dean Christian L. Christensen of the Agricultural School in hopes that they would find a post for Curry. On 19 September, Frank announced that Curry had accepted a five-year position as artist-in-residence at the University of Wisconsin, the first position of its kind in the United States.⁶⁶

Curry’s new post provided him with both time and opportunities to continue developing his art. As the first artist-in-residence in the country, he was largely able to create his own goals for the position beyond the minimal stipulations placed on him by the University. He was not obliged to teach regular classes, however he was expected to informally interact with students and locals as well as advise aspiring artists. The school provided him with a studio on campus and considered the time he spent on his art comparable to the time other staff members spent on research.⁶⁷

While this position gave Curry the steady employment in the Midwest he was looking for, it also afforded him the opportunity to further his artistic vision. Given the self-dictated structure of his job in Madison, the artist frequently had time to travel throughout the region and gather material for new works, enabling him to prove that Wisconsin, like Kansas and other seemingly un-picturesque locations, could inspire art. In addition, Curry took time away from the University to paint and install murals in Kansas, Connecticut, and Washington, DC, therefore ensuring that his vision of America and American art was not strictly limited to the region of Madison.⁶⁸

Faced with these exciting prospects, the Currys moved to Madison in early December of 1936, and John quickly set to work addressing the local Art Association and joining faculty on research trips to gather material for future works. In April of 1937, Curry journeyed to Washington, DC, to install the murals he had been working on for the Department of Justice Building. As with his other works from this time, the murals had been finished in Madison and exhibited at the University prior to their installation.

Proof that Curry's involvement with the University did not hinder his work as an artist is evident through the number of commissions he received and completed in his first year in Wisconsin. During this time, Curry, along with Benton, Wood, and Henry Varnum Poor, was awarded \$2,000 by the Limited Editions Club, New York to illustrate select works of classic American literature. His mural work also continued as he began two murals in Connecticut for Norwalk High School entitled *Ancient Industry* and *Modern Hat Industry* shortly after installing the Department of Justice works. Simultaneously, he opened negotiations with the state government of Kansas to paint a series of murals for the statehouse in Topeka.⁶⁹

Although Curry's proposal for the Topeka murals was approved by November of 1937, the realization of this series proved to be one of the most difficult and controversial points of his career. As he originally envisioned it, the four walls and eight panels in the Rotunda would depict the historical struggle between man and nature through paintings entitled *The Tragic Prelude*, *The Plagues*, and *Kansas Pastoral*.⁷⁰ As no concerns were raised by his proposal, he spent the next year and a half working on the preliminary sketches for the murals.

While designing the Topeka murals, Curry had his first show at Manyard Walker's Manhattan galleries, featuring six canvases along with several drawings and watercolors. Although critics were impressed with the artist's industry and productivity, their enthusiasm was more reserved than it had been as they noted his new works lacked vitality and seemed old-fashioned compared to his earlier works.⁷¹

In June of 1938, Curry left for a summer tour of Europe, armed with letters of introduction from Wisconsin Governor Philip F. La Follette and US Secretary of State Cordell Hull.⁷² In a letter to Henry Allen, Curry explained that his goal in traveling to Europe again was to "see Michel Angelo before [he began] the Kansas murals."⁷³ In light of Curry's early desire to create distinctly American works of art, this search for inspiration among one of the Old Masters suggests his interest in belonging to the larger world of art history, a trend he continues in his later Wisconsin landscape murals.

Curiously, this second trip to Europe does not seem to have made much of an impression on the artist beyond his obvious tribute to Michelangelo's art through his 10-foot tall image of John Brown in his *Tragic Prelude*. There are few references to his voyage and virtually no pictorial record. The uncharacteristic lack of art from this trip

implies that this was a vacation, however given Curry's passionate drive to depict the world around him, one would expect at least some images as a result of this trip.

By April of 1939, Curry faced the beginning of a long series of controversies surrounding his proposed mural series for the Kansas statehouse. Local viewers who saw the initial sketches objected to Curry's chosen subject matter, echoing Mrs. Henry J. Allen's earlier complaint that he should depict the beauty and wonders of the state rather than intense weather and dark historical figures. By May 1940, however, Curry had garnered enough temporary support in Kansas that he began painting the murals as he had planned.⁷⁴

As Curry noted in a 1941 letter to his new agent, Reeves Lewenthal, the members of the Kansas Mural Commission supported him; however his work was undermined by the Governor, Treasurer, and various other members of the Executive Council of Kansas as well as Cecil Howe of the *Kansas Star*. The artist also confided to Lewenthal that one of the main objections for including his work in the statehouse was the removal of marble slabs which would have given him more space for his murals. To compound matters, the only African American delegate on the committee objected to Curry's depiction of John Brown in *The Tragic Prelude* (1937-1942, Capitol Building, Topeka, Kansas; Fig. 2), claiming that it was not faithful to the state's past, despite the artist's assertion that he intended to depict "the fratricidal fury that first flamed on the plains of Kansas".⁷⁵



FIGURE 2

John Steuart Curry; *Tragic Prelude—John Brown*, 1937-1942

Oil and tempera on canvas; 11 ft., 6 in. x 31 ft. (overall)

As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 50

Interestingly, Curry wrote to Lewenthal that he was not glorifying the infamous abolitionist and had “portrayed John Brown as a roaring fanatic and [he] also panted his hands blood red.”⁷⁶ While this claim could be interpreted as the artist’s true feelings, as his standing with the Mural Committee would not change based on a personal letter to his agent, this painting takes on a greater significance when viewed in the light of Curry’s liberal views and long-standing support for various anti-lynching campaigns. As Sue Kendall notes, Curry agreed with the abolitionist’s cause but was horrified by the potential violence of men like Brown.⁷⁷ This controversial image, therefore, can be interpreted as a powerful, highly publicized social commentary in which the artist attempted to take a stand on an increasingly controversial social issue while also portraying his fear of the anticipated violence of another world war.

In April, barely a month after Curry enumerated his problems to Lewenthal, Kansas Secretary of State Clarence W. Miller notified the artist that the marble would not

be removed from the rotunda in order to create space for the last of the murals. Curry ultimately consented to having the murals moved to Wichita, a proposal which was suggested by Paul Jones Lyons, one of the members of the Mural Committee. Faced with the impossibility of being able to finish the series and unify his message, Curry refused to sign the completed murals, despite his belief that they were among his best works.⁷⁸

On 28 October 1942, nearly a year after being given a five-year extension as the University of Wisconsin's artist-in-residence, Curry received word that his long-time friend and fellow artist Grant Wood had died of liver cancer.⁷⁹ After the ailing artist's death, Curry expressed his sorrow over Wood's death and his gratitude for the artist and his works in a tribute that extols the Iowa native's talent and accomplishments.⁸⁰

Curry continued lecturing and painting throughout 1943 and, in 1944, the artist was commissioned by the War Department to create a series of field studies of activities in the Medical Department at Camp Barkeley. Near the end of 1945, Lewenthal proposed a national advertising program for National City Bank that would highlight the major industries of Central and South America through a national advertising campaign. For this project, the artist traveled to Cuba and Panama early in 1946 in order to research the subject and location. In a letter to Mr. Harry Wickey, a supporter of his work, Curry notes that he saw some very exciting cockfights while in Cuba, however he found the landscape too tame.⁸¹

While Curry's experience at the cockfights would have most likely produced several interesting images akin to *Stallion and Jack Fighting* (1932, Minnesota Museum of American Art, St. Paul) and *Hen and the Hawk* (1934, Memphis Brooks Museum of Art, Memphis, Tennessee), Curry did not live long enough to produce any finished works

from his trip to Central America. On 29 August 1946, the artist died of a heart attack in Madison. Although his death was relatively sudden, he had been in ill health for some time.⁸² On 1 September, Curry was buried in the cemetery at the Reformed Presbyterian Church in Winchester, Kansas. The artist was deeply mourned, despite his declining popularity among art critics, the increasing criticism he faced through the Topeka Mural controversies, and his stubborn refusal to adapt to artistic changes.

After Curry's death, the Milwaukee Art Institute sponsored a retrospective exhibition, one that they had incidentally been planning with the artist.⁸³ While the artist's works continued to be exhibited in museums across the country, Curry gradually faded into obscurity. His death also marked the end of Regionalism, as it came four years after Wood's passing and at the beginning of the rise of more modern movements, such as Abstract Expressionism. Although Benton was still alive and active in 1946, he was primarily recognized as a highly idiosyncratic painter who had the distinction of being Jackson Pollock's teacher.⁸⁴ Thus, without a major promoter, such as Curry, adding new works and new ideas, American regionalism shifted from a living art movement to an important piece of art history. Ironically, this shift also extended to Curry's reputation, which is only beginning to recover.

Chapter II: Experiences

In many ways the art of John Steuart Curry can be seen as autobiographical. His works reflect his experiences, his environment, and the social factors he encountered. While he also painted historical scenes, the amount of research and labor that went into making the works accurate underscores Curry's desire to realistically depict the familiar. As a man who continually encouraged aspiring artists to draw subjects they knew, it is especially fitting that Curry's art frequently reflected his own life.

His unwillingness to follow the example of his fellow Regionalists by defining himself stylistically also reflects the personal nature of Curry's art. His restless character led him to adventures such as traveling with the circus and venturing to Chicago, New Jersey, and Paris to study art. His concerns about becoming stereotyped undoubtedly contributed to his aversion to creating a characteristic style.

As I mentioned earlier, Curry often let the subject matter dictate the style he used in creating a specific work. Such definitive subjects were often chosen based on his experiences and specific historical events that he had meticulously researched. In particular, he frequently painted subjects which were prevalent in his life at that specific point in time, resulting in his resorting to a specific theme, such as acrobatic images, in several different works.

This chapter will focus on the various experiences in Curry's life that shaped his art and, as a result, dictated his subject matter and style. While virtually all of the events in his life affected his art in some way, two of the key events that had the most impact were his first trip to Europe and his time with the circus.

Studies in Paris

Curry's initial foray into Europe proved to have a great affect on his artistic outlook, as he allowed himself to experiment with various styles and subject matters. In the drawings he made at Schoukhaieff's academy, one can see the ultra-realist style of a young artist who is attempting to start at the beginning by learning to draw. His time with the Russian master taught him the importance of being able to draw accurately as a basis for a work of art. His sketches of nudes reveal his determination to study art from the perspective of the Old Masters. He sought to create figures that had mass and form, while also giving them the feeling of substance. This attention to the material of the subject matter proved to be a basis for Curry's later work, in which he reveals his love of mass and bulky forms through circus images such as *Baby Ruth* (1932, location unknown) and *Circus Elephants* (1932, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC).⁸⁵

Curry's frequent visits to the Louvre also proved fruitful, as he saw first hand the techniques and products of the Old Masters whom he had admired since childhood. He was especially taken with the works of Rembrandt and Rubens.⁸⁶ Benton noted that his Kansan friend was an avid student of High Renaissance painting.⁸⁷ Curry was undoubtedly attracted to highly realistic qualities of this school of art and frequently imitated such realism in his own work.

Curry's love of the Old Masters can also be seen in his numerous attempts to emulate their works. His admiration for Rembrandt in particular is apparent in his imitation of the Dutch master's tradition of creating multiple self-portraits over the course of his career. Curry created at least four self portraits, three of which show him in traditional artist poses, complete with unfinished works, rags, and paint brushes. In terms

of self-representation, these resemble Rembrandt's numerous self-portraits in which the artist paints himself in his studio or in a painter's smock at various times throughout his life. Curry's fourth self-portrait depicts him as a hunter, following Rembrandt's example of dressing up in order to create a separate, whimsical identity.



FIGURE 3

John Steuart Curry; *The Return of Private Davis from the Argonne*, 1928-1940

Oil on Canvas; 38 x 52 in.

As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 12

In addition to imitating Rembrandt and other Old Masters, Benton observed that his friend was also closely allied to the art of nineteenth-century realists such as Homer, Eakins, and Courbet.⁸⁸ The influence of Curry's Parisian encounters with Courbet's works in particular is obvious in his *Return of Private Davis from the Argonne* (1928-1940, The Warner Collection of Gulf States Paper Corporation, Tuscaloosa, Alabama; fig 3.). While the Kansas artist contended that *Private Davis* was his own original

inspiration, its structural and formal resemblance to Courbet's *Burial at Ornans* (1849-1950, Musée d'Orsay, Paris; fig. 4) render it impossible to completely disregard effect of the older painting on Curry's conception of his own picture.⁸⁹ Both paintings depict a funeral in which solemn mourners stand around an open grave or unburied casket, creating a U-shape around the burial site. While Curry's rendition of this theme features more depth and a more impressionistic, brushy depiction of the mourners than Courbet's work, the similarities between the two and the likelihood that the American artist would have seen the older masterpiece in the Louvre make it doubtful that he was unaware of the older painting when creating *Private Davis*.



FIGURE 4

Gustave Courbet; *A Burial at Ornans*, 1849-1850

10 ft., 3.5 in. x 21 ft., 9 in.

As reproduced in Sarah Faunce, *Gustave Courbet* (New York, NY: Harry N Abrams, Inc., 1993), color plate 8

Stylistically, Curry's art during this period can also be seen as being heavily influenced by the Impressionists he encountered in Paris, a connection which Benton noted early in Curry's career.⁹⁰ The influence of Impressionistic works by artists such as Renoir is especially apparent in the filmy, almost sentimental, quality of some of Curry's paintings. *At the Circus* (1936, Private Collection), for instance, shows an excited,

breathless audience waiting for the show to begin. This work stands out as different from Curry's other circus pictures as it features softer lines and colors, creating an effect similar to Renoir's *Girl with a Hoop* (1885, National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC).

The brushy quality and lack of attention to accurate perspective and proportion common in many Impressionist works are also prevalent elements of Curry's art. While he strove for a high degree of realism in both factual and narrative accuracy, Curry did not seem overly concerned with capturing a photographic image of reality or making his works photorealistic. His attention to detail is limited to incorporating small items in the background or subtle jokes regarding his name or the narrative of the story in works such as *The Oklahoma Land Rush* (1938, Mural, US Department of the Interior Building, Washington, DC).⁹¹ Attention to small particulars stopped there, however, as he frequently painted figural details as simple shadows, as in the faces of the spectators in *Baptism*. He also often ignores perspective in favor of making the narrative plainly understandable, as he does by tipping the water tank up in *Bathers* (1928, location unknown) in order to clearly show the activity being depicted.

Perhaps the most important element of Curry's first trip to Europe, however, was his brief venture into modern art on the streets of Montmartre. His experimentation with the styles of Picasso and Matisse show that Curry was actively thinking about art and did not blindly reject other methods in order to develop his own. He clearly understood from experience that a new art must be created if one was to depict distinctly American subject matters to an American audience.

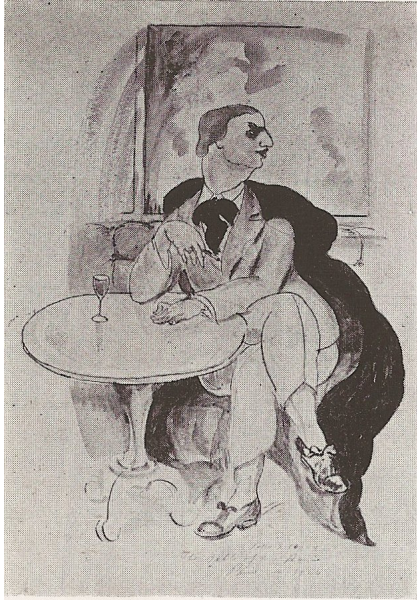


FIGURE 5
John Steuart Curry; *The Belle of the Dome*, 1926
As reproduced in Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, fig. 26



FIGURE 6
John Steuart Curry; *Paris Café*, 1927
As reproduced in Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, fig. 25



FIGURE 7
John Steuart Curry; *Streetwalker*, 1927
As reproduced in Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, fig. 27

His willingness to experiment with other European styles is evident in the extent to which his Montmartre watercolors mimic these modern masters. Curry's paintings such as *The Belle of the Dome* (1926, location unknown; fig. 5), *Paris Café* (1927,

location unknown; fig 6), and *Streetwalker* (1927, location unknown; fig 7) reveal his attempt to understand this genre before completely discarding it. In these works, he seems to be experimenting with the sketchy brush strokes, twisted perspectives, and exaggerated proportions common to the modernist European masters. These watercolors, while well-done, are obvious tributes to modern art and in examining them, it becomes apparent why Curry distanced himself from modernist European art. These styles reflect too much of the European influence Curry was attempting to avoid. To rely on Picasso's style to depict a Kansas corn field would be incongruous with his artistic ideal. Consequently, he sought to create a uniquely American means of depicting his homeland.

The influence of this trip on Curry's art becomes especially apparent when contrasted with the relative lack of work from his second voyage to Europe. During this first trip, Curry arrived in Europe with the express purpose of improving his art and took every opportunity to paint, sketch, or draw. He came away with a conviction that an American artist could not expect to faithfully depict his or her country by using European artistic standards. Curry returned to Europe in 1938, however, as a more mature artist and, curiously, produced relatively little art from this trip. In comparison, it seems that Curry felt that he had exhausted or outgrown the possibilities of the Continent during his initial visit and was therefore relatively uninterested in what European artists could contribute to the American style he and the other Regionalists had worked hard to develop.

Life with the Circus

The three months Curry spent with the Ringling Brothers' circus also proved to be highly influential. While Curry's restless personality and aversion to being stereotyped

can be seen as one of the impetuses for this trip, this quality also becomes apparent in the art he produced from this period as he does not settle into a specific subject matter while traveling with the circus. The series of pictures that resulted from his trip reveals the plethora of ready subjects he found under the Big Top.



FIGURE 8

John Steuart Curry; *The Flying Codonas*, 1932

Tempera and oil on composition board; 36 x 30 in.

As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 25

Unwilling to limit himself to a specific act or scene, Curry painted everything from the acrobats and the human cannonball to the animals, audience, and clowns.

Curry's penchant for depicting action is revealed throughout this series of works as he spent countless hours watching the acrobatic shows and sketching the routines from different angles.⁹² These sketches provided him with ample material for later works such as the oil entitled *The Flying Codonas* (1932, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York; fig. 8), a painting that has become one of his most well-known circus pictures.

It is interesting to compare Curry's earlier action works with these later ones of the circus. During his time as an illustrator, Curry produced many images of fighting characters that feature a palpable tension between the characters and an excited energy about the conflict being depicted. In later works, however, after Curry had given up illustration in order to be a creative artist, he seems to focus more on the form of the figures and depicting a realistic image rather than emotion and energy. Consequently, many of the "action works" from later in his career have a static, studied quality that becomes apparent when one examines the work in contrast to the spontaneous, free feeling that appears in his earlier illustrations.

The almost motionless feeling of these "action" images can perhaps be attributed to a shift in style. In Curry's earlier works such as *Coyotes Stealing a Pig* (1927, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC) and *Hogs Killing a Snake* (1930, The Art Institute of Chicago), he enhances the action of the scene through a brushy, impressionistic style. The loose feeling of the lines, the unrefined details, and the upwards diagonal shapes formed by the main subjects of these works emphasize the tense, unsettled atmosphere of the scene. Later works such as *The Flying Codonas*, however, lose this agitated style in favor of a more polished feeling that is almost akin to Benton's smooth lines and heavily layered paint. However, Curry's inability at this point

to capture the rhythmic, pulsing style that lends dynamism to Benton's work leaves the younger artist's circus images with a flat, almost inert feeling. The viewer waits for the leaping Codona to complete his mid-air summersault but soon realizes that there is not enough energy in the work for him to do so. Following the lines of the tent to the downward diagonal of the "catching" acrobat, the observer is struck by the stationary feeling of this man's position and the work's polished lines. In short, although Curry's experiments with form, style, and composition helped him with his later works, they weakened the brisk energy and zest that his circus action images required in order to be as captivating as his other works.

While Curry's restless approach to artistic style and subject matter reflect his personality and motives for joining the circus's tour, the relative isolation of these subjects in his career is also indicative of their autobiographical nature. The majority of these images were completed relatively soon after his 1932 stint with the circus, and he did not continue creating many circus themed pictures after Ferargil's exhibit of this series in 1933, indicating his tendency to depict his experiences as they occurred.

While he reused many of the techniques he developed during his time with the circus, the isolation of the subject matter to a few years of Curry's career underscores the autobiographical nature of the works. He did not reunite with the Ringling Brothers' Circus after this initial three-month tour, nor did he appear to remain in touch with the friends he met in the show after their visit to New York and his exhibit at the Ferargil. Curry's artistic "phase" of circus pictures corresponds exactly to his personal "phase" of joining the circus, emphasizing the artist's penchant to depict the subjects that he was encountering at that time.

Chapter III: Environment

In painting the subjects and events of his life, Curry also frequently painted familiar environments. It is interesting to note that despite having spent time as a child in the southwest as well as a large portion of his artistic career in the Northeast, the Midwest appears to have had the most impact on his art.

This section will investigate the way in which Curry's environment and surroundings are represented in his weather and landscape scenes. It will consider the types of views and storms he frequently depicted as well as the distinct images and themes he avoided. It will also take into account the events in Curry's life that, according to Schmeckebeier, the artist attributed to his desire to paint specific themes.

Weather

The majority of Curry's scenes depicting dramatic weather take place in Kansas where, as Henry Adams noted, "the weather becomes a substitute for scenery."⁹³ Given the state's unpredictable, sometimes devastatingly hostile weather, life on a Kansas farm proved precarious and highly dependent on the weather. In the decade prior to Curry's birth, for example, a series of droughts and locusts caused widespread financial disaster for Kansas farmers and forced many to move east.⁹⁴ It is no small wonder, then, that the Kansas farm boy-turned-artist decided to depict the very weather for which his state was famous and which he had heard discussed from the beginning of his life.

Curry uses images such as *Tornado* (1929, Muskegon Museum of Art, Muskegon, Michigan; fig. 9) to portray the impressive power of the storm and to convey the sense of fear and urgency such storms inspired. In this work, he depicts a family running for shelter as a distant funnel of a tornado sweeps toward their farm. The crazed look in the

mother's and daughter's eyes as well as the terrified cat held by one of the sons bespeak the gravity and danger of the situation while the stupidly calm chicken and deadly serenity of the foreground hint at the eerie stillness that precedes such Midwest storms.



FIGURE 9
John Steuart Curry; *Tornado*, 1929
Oil on canvas; 46.25 x 60.5 in.
As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 20

As with his other works, Curry lets this image dictate the style he employed. Here, he relies on a smooth, polished style to illustrate the moments leading up to the tornado. The sharp, clean lines contribute to the disturbingly peaceful, pre-storm atmosphere he was attempting to depict. The harsh lighting on the mother's face as well as the long shadows cast by the fleeing family emphasizes the tranquility in the air just before the funnel cloud arrives. He successfully uses crisp details in the expressions of

the characters as well as the shadows, highlights and depiction of ordinary background objects to convey the startling clarity of the air that seems to exist in the moments just prior to such tragically severe weather. In short, the artist successfully alters his usually sketchy style to capture the essence of the scene and convey its emotional nature.

Curry's experiences in the Midwest contribute to his understanding of this scene and the action depicted, making this a powerful image that invokes a strong emotional response from the viewer. For those who have lived through similar situations, the image recalls unpleasant memories of relatively frequent events, an element of his art which perhaps explains the cold reception it received in the Midwest. Those who have not experienced such terrifying storms, however, are called upon to marvel at the ferocious majesty of the scene and to wonder what their reaction would be to such a threatening tempest.

The scene's emotional nature and accuracy reflect the highly personal element of Curry's art. Although it is speculated that he never witnessed a tornado first hand, Curry was familiar with fleeing to storm cellars as his family frequently retreated underground during his childhood to escape sudden, severe thunderstorms.⁹⁵ It would have been nearly impossible for him to have been unacquainted with the routines and weather preceding the arrival of a tornado as discussions with friends and family as well as witnessing tornado-like conditions would have made him very familiar with such storms and the danger surrounding them. A letter from his mother almost a year after he completed *Tornado* reveals the intricate detail such conversations would have included as she vividly described the sound of the storm, the actions of the townspeople, the aftermath, and even the shape of the funnel cloud through a small sketch.⁹⁶

Curry depicts an example of frightening thunderstorms he fled from in his youth in *Line Storm* (1934, location unknown; fig. 10). In this image, he combines a scenic vista with a massive wall of storm and lightening that dwarfs the group in the foreground rushing to get their hay in a safe, dry place before it is ruined by the rain. The open, nearly treeless expanse of the land and the solid wall of harsh weather create a uniquely Midwestern image of storms common to the region.



FIGURE 10

John Steuart Curry; *Line Storm*, 1934

Oil and tempera on panel; 36 x 48 in.

As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 33

This image, however, appears more matter-of-fact than *Tornado*. The small size of the visible figures in the foreground serves to diminish the element of terror, making the storm into an awesome force of nature rather than a terrifying and potentially deadly catastrophe. This shift can perhaps best be explained by the personal events occurring in Curry's life during the time he was painting these works. The artist admitted to Schmeckebier that his tendency to depict fierce storms was closely related to the turmoil

in his personal life during the period between 1928 and 1932. During this time, he was facing the crushing burdens of economic uncertainty, career concerns, and his wife Clara's illness and subsequent death. Schmeckebier concludes that the happier years of 1933 and 1934, due to his developing relationship with Kathleen, are reflected in the series of sunrise pictures Curry painted during these years as well as the small, sunrise sketch he often added over his autograph for admirers.⁹⁷ Following this reasoning, the more objective view of *Line Storm* as opposed to *Tornado* suggests Curry's transition into a happier period in his life.

The theory that Curry was drawn to tragic, fierce scenes during times of personal crisis could explain the relative lack of winter scenes in his repertoire. For an artist who was notorious for painting storms and who frequently painted his surroundings, one would expect a number of winter images, especially given the ten winters he spent in Wisconsin. While a small number of his works from his time in Connecticut feature a winter scene through a window in the background, he appears to have made very few paintings that focus solely on winter. One such painting, entitled *First Snow* (1930, location unknown) features a dreary, flat, almost folk-like image which depicts the view from the artist's studio across the Saugatuck River in the dead of winter.⁹⁸ It is strikingly static for Curry's work of this period, as if he was unsure of how to approach a winter painting and resolved to avoid them in the future.

Although Schmeckebier's theory partially explains Curry's avoidance of winter images, I would argue that there are other factors involved as well. By the time he moved to Wisconsin, the personal problems that led him to depict such haunting images of tempestuous weather had largely been solved. Consequently, the artist all but abandoned

storm scenes and was concentrating on commissions that focused on more social and political themes. Many of these two subjects are represented in his murals from this time. Pursuing these themes during his time in Wisconsin would suggest that he spent the majority of the colder months inside his studio completing commissions rather than exploring the dreary, icy landscape for new material. Regardless of these explanations, it does seem uncharacteristic of Curry to completely neglect to depict such a large element of his life as winter in Wisconsin by not painting this notoriously harsh season.

Landscapes

The absence of Wisconsin winter scenes in Curry's oeuvre is slightly offset by the landscape images he created while working in Madison. While he created a relatively small number of Kansas landscapes, such as *Spring Shower* or *Kansas Wheat Ranch* (1930, location unknown), these almost invariably contain a small storm or farm structure of some sort, therefore diminishing the effect of the wide expanse of prairie that constituted any Kansas vista. The majority of his landscape paintings, therefore, was created in and around Madison and frequently portrays the scene in a way that is strikingly similar to the work of the Dutch Masters he admired.



FIGURE 11

John Steuart Curry; *Wisconsin Landscape*, 1937-1939

Oil on canvas; 42 x 84 in.

As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 56

Curry's most famous landscape is his *Wisconsin Landscape* of 1937-1939 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; fig. 11), in which he depicts a view of the farm land of Belleville, Dane County, Wisconsin.⁹⁹ The high viewpoint from which Curry situated his canvas as well as the farming activities he depicts below is reminiscent of Jacob van Ruisdael's *View of Haarlem, with Bleaching Fields* (c. 1670, Kunsthhaus, Zurich; fig. 12) in which the older painter portrayed a view of the landscape and agricultural activities surrounding the Dutch city. The similarities between these two works supports the artist's increasing fascination with the Dutch Masters which Benton noticed in his friend's later career. Curry's faithful depiction of the clouds' shadows and the quilted appearance of adjacent fields with different crops again reveal the artist's faithful adherence to the reality of the scene.



FIGURE 12

Jacob van Ruisdael; *View of Haarlem with Bleaching Grounds*, c. 1670

Oil on canvas; 22.84 x 24.4 in.

As reproduced in Seymour Slive and H. R. Hoetink, *Jacob van Ruisdael* (New York, NY: Abbeville Press, 1981), color plate 44

Curry's painting elicited a strange response from critics as many initially felt it was a poor example of his stylistic and technical abilities. Benton even went so far as to imply that his first impression of his friend's painting was that it was an offensive, badly designed painting fit only for a flea market. Despite these negative first impressions, Benton, and others, slowly warmed to it and ultimately concluded that it was one of Curry's masterpieces, a spiritually profound image that was comparable to Cézanne's Mt. Victoire series in terms of its impact on the art world.¹⁰⁰

As with Curry's Kansas storm scenes, it appears that those most taken with the painting were also those least familiar with Wisconsin scenery. While Benton mentions

visiting his friend in Madison, his response echoes that of critics who saw the scene as an almost exotic landscape.¹⁰¹ For those acquainted with rural Wisconsin, however, the scene is a splendidly depicted view of an average farm in the countryside. These viewers find the most remarkable element of it to be the peaceful feeling of the work and the dappled sunlight across the fields rather than the artistic breakthrough it symbolized to Benton and other viewers.

While Curry's best known landscape painting is *Wisconsin Landscape*, he also created many images of scenic vistas during his trips around Wisconsin. Like his more famous landscape work, these rural scenes include hay stacks, cows, and, in one, Lake Mendota. The crucial difference between these lesser-known works and *Wisconsin Landscape* is the smaller scale of the view. None of them include the broad, all-encompassing expanse of the more well-known work but rather feature a smaller, more closed composition that is pictorially similar to the French Baroque Master Claude Lorrain's works in that the views are typically framed by trees or small bushes that flank the scene on either side.

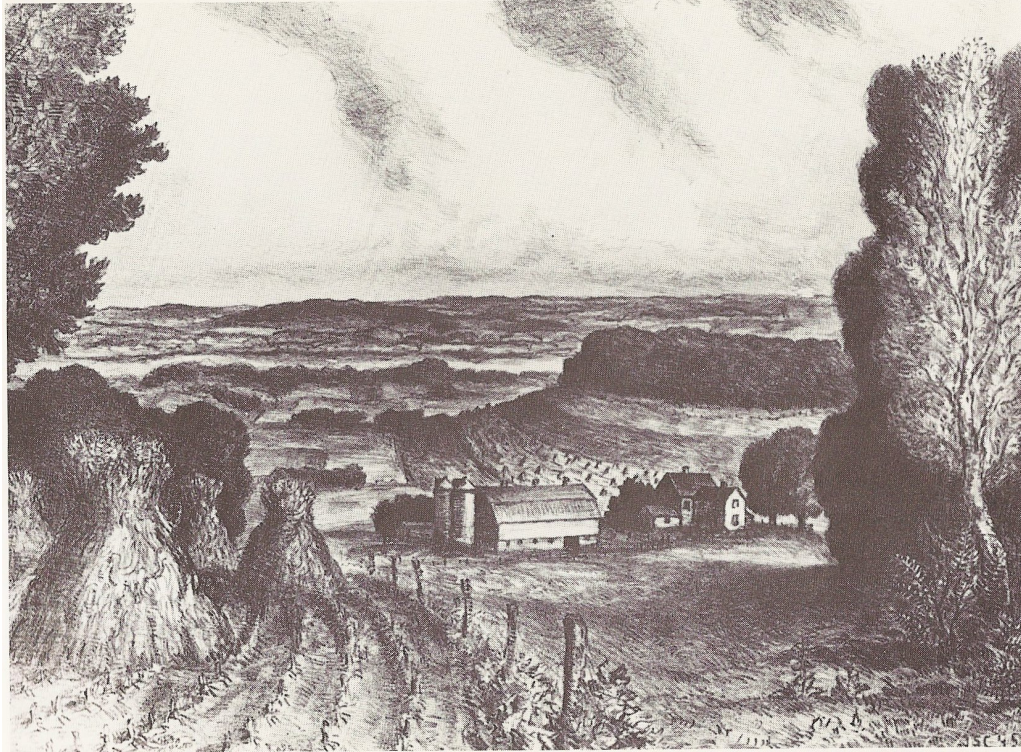


FIGURE 13

John Steuart Curry; *Valley of the Wisconsin*, 1945

Lithograph; 11.75 x 15.375 in.

As reproduced in Ann C. Madonia, *Prairie Visions and Circus Wonders: The Complete Lithographic Suite by John Steuart Curry* (Davenport, IA: Davenport Art Gallery, 1980), figure 8

This composition technique is especially apparent in one of his lithographs entitled *Valley of the Wisconsin* (1945, private collection; fig. 13). Here, the scenic vista is seen from the top of a hill overlooking a partially harvested hay field and a small barn. On either side of this vista, Curry painted two trees that serve to close the work in on itself, a technique that calls to mind a long tradition of framing a scene with trees in both French and American art. It seems curious that Curry would employ such a traditionally European technique when attempting to convey a uniquely American scene. The effect serves to present a very different, almost claustrophobic feeling which is highlighted when contrasted to his depictions of the wide open expanses of the Kansas prairie and other Wisconsin farms.

Chapter IV: Social Influences

Curry's art was continually affected by various elements of society that he encountered during his career. The people he associated with frequently helped determine the subject of his works, while other, broader factors such as Roosevelt's New Deal meant that Curry was given large federal commissions to create murals for government buildings and schools. Several of his pictures reveal his political opinions as he depicted political rallies and anti-war images later in his career.

While many events and social pressures in Curry's life influenced his art, this chapter will focus on the religious influences and the effects of his association with other Regionalists. It will consider how his upbringing and childhood experiences in a religious family provided inspiration for his art as well as how he relied on familiar religious themes to render his works accessible to a larger audience. This section will also examine how Curry's friendship with Benton and Wood became evident in his art and how he employed their techniques to enhance his own abilities.

Religious Images

Curry's religious background was an important part of his early life. Raised as a Scottish Covenanter, the artist made connections as a young adult with several other Presbyterian organizations, including Geneva College. Letters home to his mother reveal that Harvey Dunn encouraged him to read the Bible,¹⁰² a piece of advice that seemed to take the Midwestern boy by surprise and indicates that he was still adhering to his upbringing. However, upon his return from Europe and after comprehending the disasters of World War I, Curry ultimately rejected his childhood beliefs, as letters after 1927 do not mention religion.¹⁰³

Regardless of his personal beliefs, it is apparent that Curry's religious upbringing remained an influential part of his life as he continued to rely on his knowledge of the Bible and various religious themes for artistic material. He found religion to be such an effective, readily understood motif that he continued to attend Pentecostal meetings in the later 1930's with Ellen, his adopted daughter, as if to gather more inspiration.¹⁰⁴



FIGURE 14

John Steuart Curry; *Gospel Train*, 1929

Oil on canvas; 40 x 52 in.

As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 15

The fruits of his experiences at Pentecostal meetings can be seen in his 1929 paintings entitled *Gospel Train* (Syracuse University Art Collection, Syracuse, New York; fig. 14) and *Prayer for Grace* (Jean Chapman Born; fig. 15). While these predate his time with Ellen, the prominence of a young girl in both of these images and the low, almost childlike view bespeak Curry's approach to religion as an element of his youth. In both of

these images, he also highlighted the elements of Pentecostalism that are strikingly different from Covenanters. This is most clearly evidenced in his depiction of the Pentecostal experience of Sanctification in which worshipers achieve extreme emotional states and speak in tongues as evidence of God's acceptance. This difference in worshiping techniques provided Curry with a great deal of visual imagery that was otherwise lacking in his experience with Covenanter services.¹⁰⁵



FIGURE 15

John Steuart Curry; *Prayer for Grace*, 1929

Oil on Canvas; 20 x 26 in.

As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 18

One of the earliest and most famous examples of Curry's religious paintings is *Baptism* (See fig. 1) in which he depicted a typical baptism scene similar to ones he undoubtedly witnessed in his youth.¹⁰⁶ While many have written about this particular painting and the spontaneous success which followed its debut, it is perhaps most interesting to note how Curry contrasted modern elements, such as electricity and

automobiles, with conventional religious symbolism, such as two doves descending from heavenly rays of light and the traditional image of a religious authority submerging the faithful. This dichotomy contributed to the dramatic element of the painting and was heralded by Mr. Jewell of *The New York Times* as a satire on religious fanaticism.¹⁰⁷

The style in which Curry painted this work also contributes to the juxtaposition between the traditional and the modern. While he sought to depict the time-honored motif of baptism, he did so in a very loose, brushy manner that calls to mind many of the Impressionist works which he undoubtedly saw while in Paris. The impressionistic quality of the faces calls to mind Monet's tendency to depict details by their shadows while the surprisingly thin layers of paint lends it an unfinished feeling akin to Degas' works. The lack of details among the larger, more important objects such as faces and bodies contrasts sharply with the attention he paid to smaller details such as the white picket fence and telephone poles in the background.



FIGURE 16

John Steuart Curry; *Mississippi Noah*, 1935

Oil and tempera on panel; 36 x 47.5 in.

As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 34

The dichotomy between the traditional and the modern that pervades this painting can perhaps best be explained by Robert Gambone's theory that Curry's trips to the Louvre acquainted him with the Renaissance tradition of depicting biblical characters in contemporary clothing.¹⁰⁸ This artistic tradition resonated with Curry, and he strove to continue it by portraying traditional themes and motifs within a more modern setting, therefore echoing the masterworks he greatly admired while also making his works accessible to a modern audience. This artistic trend is obvious in many of his religious images, such as *Mississippi Noah* (1932 lithograph, Davenport Museum of Art, Davenport Iowa; 1935 oil, St. Louis Art Museum; fig. 16) in which he depicted an African-American family huddling together on their roof praying to be delivered from the rising waters of the Mississippi River.

Curry's ability to mingle biblical stories with modern commentary becomes especially apparent in his lithograph and oil painting entitled *The Fugitive* (1935 lithograph, Smithsonian American Art Museum, Washington, DC; 1934-36 oil, Private collection; fig. 17, fig. 18). Here, he depicted a young African-American man hiding in a tree while a group of white men and dogs search for him in the distance below.



FIGURE 17
John Steuart Curry; *The Fugitive*, 1934-1936
Oil on canvas; 38 x 36 in.
As reproduced in Junker, *John Steuart Curry*, color plate 31

Originally painted for a 1935 anti-lynching exhibition organized by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Secretary Walter White, this painting, along with the lithograph of the image and the painting *Manhunt* (1931, Joslyn Art Museum, Omaha, Nebraska) indicated Curry's support of the campaign. Emphasizing this social commentary as well as his religious background, Curry makes liberal use of the crucifixion motif, a common theme in literature on lynching that points out the irony of the southern, Christian lynchers who sought to inflict a slow, painful death on African Americans similar to that which was inflicted on Christ by the Romans.

Consequently, the African-American fugitive in Curry's painting stands with his back and legs pressed against the tree trunk, while his arms are outstretched along the branches of the tree in an obviously Christ-like pose. His upturned head and the rays of light that illuminate his face and leg further underscore the religious symbolism as they resemble the heavenly light often depicted in traditional religious images.¹⁰⁹



FIGURE 18

John Steuart Curry; *The Fugitive*; 1935

Lithograph; 13 x 9.5 in.

As reproduced in Madonia, *Prairie Visions*, fig. 25

Curry's religious upbringing undoubtedly affected many of his works. While he painted many images, such as *The Oklahoma Land Rush*, that reflect historical events rather than biblical or religious themes, it is unmistakable that the artist was relying on religious imagery and motifs to add a powerful, spiritual element to his works. Other works like *Baptism* refer directly to religion both in the work itself as well as the title and

underscore the highly personal nature of Curry's art as he drew on his own childhood experiences and beliefs in order to create forceful images.

Wood's and Benton's Influences

As Benton noted, the three Regionalists gradually influenced one another over the course of their friendship.¹¹⁰ After studying Wood's works, the Missouri artist noticed that he began to focus on textural detail while exposure to Curry's works led him to try for more visual accuracy. He also felt that Wood and Curry began to pay more attention to the three-dimensional nature of their works after analyzing his works. Benton observed that, while Curry was perhaps least affected by the artistic exchange of ideas, the younger artist did consider the sculptural form and decorative nature of his works as his association with Benton and Wood increased.

Benton's influence on Curry's work is particularly apparent in *The Fugitive*. As with many of his other works, Curry uses a brushy, impressionistic style to convey the mood of this bizarre painting; however, he also borrows elements from Benton's art in order to enhance the perilous feeling. The rhythmic brushstrokes and angular shapes that comprise the forest in the background as well as the jagged trio of leaves near the fugitive's hip lend a tormented, harsh feeling to the work.

It is particularly interesting to note how Curry handled the fugitive's feet. The rhythmic curves and heavy outlining is reminiscent of Benton. In the lithograph version of this image, Curry even went so far as to elongate the figure's toes, giving them a curving, flowing feeling that fits with Benton's fluid style. While this influence is somewhat less apparent in the oil painting than the lithograph, both reveal the degree to which Curry was looking to his older colleague for artistic inspiration.

Regardless of the influence of Benton's style, Curry manages to maintain his own sense of artistic values in *The Fugitive*. The differences between the oil and the lithograph reveal that he was actively thinking through the image and attempting to determine how best to convey his message. In the lithograph, for example, the figure's leg is highlighted by rays of almost heavenly light while his head remains in the shadows, as if to emphasize his dark skin and desire to hide. In the oil, however, the fugitive's face and shoulders are lit as the man raises his eyes to heaven while his leg and feet are plunged in shadow. The sketchiness of both the painting and the lithograph serve to camouflage the figure hiding in the tree and invites the viewer to pause and study the work in order to understand it.

As Curry was utilizing Benton's curvaceous, rhythmic style, he also began to create decorative works that resembled the highly stylized, silhouetted qualities of Wood's later works. As part of a general movement to show how museum works influenced commercial design, he accepted a series of commissions from Steuben Glass, The American Way, and the American Tobacco Company in the late 1930's and early 1940's to create designs for new products and advertising.¹¹¹

Wood's influence is most apparent in Curry's design for Steuben Glass. The image of vegetables and a shock of corn set against a backdrop of highly stylized clouds is strikingly similar to Wood's later works in which the images appear to be almost silhouettes formed by the simple shapes that make up the image. The geometric depiction and lack of any background or narrative render the design markedly different from Curry's other works and yet surprisingly similar to Wood's signature style.

Conclusion

John Steuart Curry was a remarkable artist who made significant contributions to the development of a uniquely American artistic style. His efforts, combined with those of Thomas Hart Benton and Grant Wood, marked the beginning of a shift in American art as these artists began to turn to their own country for inspiration and material rather than to their European counterparts. The success of the Regionalists' works led others to follow their example, therefore paving the way for modern art movements such as Abstract Expressionism.

Curry's desire to remain true to the visual reality he encountered embodied the essence of Regionalism.¹¹² His Midwest landscapes, vivid storms, and farm scenes revealed the beauty of what many considered mundane, everyday sights. His rejection of modern European artistic trends and association with other Midwestern artists set him firmly within the Regionalist school and typify the goals and outlooks of his two colleagues in the movement.

From his initial success in 1928 with *Baptism in Kansas* to his death in 1946, Curry created powerful images that sparked both thought-provoking artistic trends and fiery social debates. Paintings such as *Wisconsin Landscape* forced successful artists like Benton to pause and consider Curry's technique, often resulting in their appreciating him on a new level. Other works created controversy and bitter feelings, such as Curry's murals for the Kansas Statehouse which the artist refused to sign and were ultimately removed from their original location in an attempt to quell the storm they evoked.

Throughout his career, Curry's independent, restless personality was embodied in his art. Just as he was reluctant become stereotyped as an artist with a specific style or

subject matter, he was also unwilling to establish himself stylistically or thematically. Instead, the artist let the subject matter of his works dictate their style. The theme of the image, in turn, was frequently determined by the circumstances in which Curry found himself, a tendency which resulted in subjects ranging from college sports and circus images to religious images and social commentaries. His biography is reflected in his art in many ways. This thesis has focused on the ways in which his experiences, environment and social influences affected his outlook on his work and became apparent in his art.

While Curry managed to incorporate nearly all of his experiences into his art, the two that proved to have the most affect on his life and art were his first trip to Paris and his time with the circus. During his trip to Europe, Curry took formal art lessons at Schoukhaieff's academy and gained an understanding draftsmanhip and how to depict form and anatomy. When he was not working at the academy, he visited the Louvre and became acquainted with the works of the Old Masters, Courbet, Monet, Renoir, and other more recent artists who had a profound affect on how he approached his art. Although his introduction to impressionist art during this time proved influential in his works, it is perhaps his watercolors of the streets of Montmartre that had the most impact on his artistic outlook. In these, Curry experimented with the techniques of modern French artists such as Picasso and Matisse, proving to himself that these styles were unsuitable for depicting the distinctly American scenes he wished to create.

His exposure and experimentation with European art enabled him to make informed decisions in finding his artistic voice. His knowledge of impressionist works provided him with a style he liked best, however one that he would employ only when he felt it fit the image and message he wished to express. During this trip to Europe, Curry

began to understand that an American art was needed that did not rely on European models in order to successfully capture the essence of America.

Curry's experience with the circus is highly indicative of how his biography is reflected in his art. His three month tour represents a unique period in Curry's art as his circus-themed pictures stopped, with one exception, after 1933. While he learned a great deal about depicting movement, musculature, and form, he only depicted circus images while he was with the circus and while this experience was fresh in his memory. Consequently, Curry revealed his tendency to depict his experiences as they occur, moving on to a new subject and style as the events in his life unfolded.

The environment in which Curry found himself also affected his works, as shown by his tendency to depict landscapes and weather. Early in his career, the artist was renowned for depicting the famous storms and harsh weather that formed a large part of Kansas' reputation. While this alienated many of his fellow Kansans, the powerful emotion which he was able to invoke perhaps accounts for his success on the East Coast, where many viewers were unfamiliar with such scenes. Interestingly, Curry neglected to depict winter scenes, an uncharacteristic omission given that most of his adult life was spent in northern climates where he undoubtedly faced harsh winters.

The absence of winter images in Curry's oeuvre can perhaps be explained by Schmeckebier's theory that the artist was drawn to dramatic, destructive weather scenes because of personal struggles with his career, marriage, and finances. By 1934, when many of these problems had been resolved and Curry had married Kathleen Shepherd Gould, he began to depict sunrise images, as if to symbolize the happier times he foresaw in his future. With this theory in mind, therefore, he would have been through the

personal struggles and depression that resulted in his tormented weather images by the time he moved to Wisconsin and was therefore looking for happier, warmer images than those which he found in the winter landscapes.

Regardless of Curry's neglect of Wisconsin winters, he frequently painted the local landscapes during his ten years at the University of Wisconsin. As with his works in other genres, the artist used a variety of styles and techniques when creating these images in order to create pictorially effective images. Some of his works, such as *Wisconsin Landscape*, portray a large, open vista in which Curry paid a great deal of attention to realistic details. In works like *The Valley of the Wisconsin*, the artist employs traditional framing techniques akin to Claude Lorrain's landscapes as if to justify his work in the grander scheme of art history.

In addition to being affected by his experiences and environment, Curry was also influenced by various social elements he encountered. As Schmeckeber pointed out, Curry was not a product of the Great Depression, having developed his ideas on art and what he wished to accomplish through his works prior to 1929.¹¹³ Instead of being influenced by this economic disaster, he relied on his religious upbringing and later attendance of Pentecostal meetings for easily understandable material in the form of religious motifs. His efforts to use religious images in a modern, and therefore more accessible, context resulted in works like *The Fugitive* and *Mississippi Noah* which make use of biblical stories and traditional postures in order to evoke emotion and convey a specific message. In the case of *The Fugitive*, the artist effectively uses the religious element to express his personal social commentary.

Perhaps the most significant artistic influence that played a role in Curry's work is his association with Benton and Wood. From the former, he adopted a rhythmic, fluid style that he sparingly employed in his later works to contribute to the mood or texture of the work. Benton's effect is profoundly apparent in *The Fugitive*, as Curry created his own impressionistic version of Benton's pulsing, fluctuating style to create an agitated, frightening forest in which his fugitive hides. The influence of the older Regionalist is further highlighted in Curry's handling of the figure's feet, as they strongly echo the elongated, unnaturally curved way in which Benton frequently represented his subjects.

Wood's influences appear to be somewhat more limited, however Curry's later works do reflect the Iowa native's art as he began to focus more on the design element of the work rather than the narrative aspect. This becomes especially apparent in the decorative motifs he created for companies such as Steuben Glass. Here, his images are highly stylized, geometric depictions of his chosen subject, culminating in works that in no way resemble his earlier works.

While Curry was affected by his colleagues and gradually began to incorporate their styles into his own work, he did so in his own way, adopting the techniques and styles to suit his work and his artistic goals. As a result, he continued to effectively maximize his lack of a signature style and emphasize his artistic flexibility in letting the subject determine the ultimate appearance of the image.

This acceptance of others' ideals mingled with personal interpretation is also indicative of Curry's nature, as he was willing to accede to critics and public opinion, but only when it agreed with his views. This is best illustrated in his reaction to the Kansas

mural controversy in which he agreed that the works could be moved from Topeka to Wichita but made his frustration known by refusing to sign the finished murals.

Curry's personality is further underscored in the works themselves through their quiet appeal to the discerning visitor. Unlike Benton, Curry does not seem to have been overly interested in self-promotion. While he frequently lectured about art, he did not write about his personal artistic goals or views on art as much as his two colleagues. Rather, Curry seems to have been content to let his works and commissions speak for themselves, an attitude which becomes apparent through his works.

Perhaps it is this element of Curry's nature, his frank, open statement of his artistic message and goals, which eventually led to the decline in scholarly interest and in his popularity. While Benton wrote several volumes on art and had the distinction of being Jackson Pollock's teacher and Wood managed to preserve enough ambiguity surrounding his work and personal life to keep scholars interested, Curry's candid nature and his accessible art resulted in the relative lack of interest among scholars.

Only recently has his work begun to attract the attention of art historians. This thesis is an attempt to contribute to the body of knowledge about Curry by analyzing his art through his life. It sought to consider the way in which his life influenced and is apparent in his art. While many artists depict what they encounter, Curry chose to focus his art and artistic style on the events that occurred in his life at the time he was creating the works. This is particularly apparent in his depiction and adoption of his experiences, environment, and social influences. It is my hope that this discussion of Curry, his life, and his work will help to further the scholarship on this artist and his valuable contribution to American art.

¹ Thomas Craven, "U.S. Scene," *Time* 24 no. 6 (24 December 1934): 24

² M. Sue Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism: John Steuart Curry and the Kansas Mural Controversy* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1986), 13

³ Thomas Hart Benton, *An American in Art: a Professional and Technical Autobiography* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1969), 148

⁴ Benton, *An American in Art*, 151

⁵ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Benton, *An American in Art*, 155

⁶ Benton, *An American in Art*, 156

⁷ For information for this paragraph and the following, I have drawn from Benton, *An American in Art*, 152

⁸ Craven, "U.S. Scene," 25; Wanda Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*. (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983), 42-43

⁹ Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, 42-43

¹⁰ John Steuart Curry, "Address before the Art Association of Madison, Tuesday, 19 January 1937," Curry Papers, Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C.[hereafter cited as Curry Papers/AAA], microfilm roll 165

¹¹ Corn, *Grant Wood: The Regionalist Vision*, 42

¹² Benton, *An American in Art*, 152

¹³ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Benton, *An American in Art*, pgs 153-154

¹⁴ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Lawrence E. Schmeckebier, *John Steuart Curry's Pageant of America* (New York: American Artists Group, 1943), 76. Although Schmeckebier's book has been criticized for not having enough bibliographic detail, various letters found in the Smithsonian's American Art Archives indicate that Curry endorsed this biography and even ordered copies of it for himself. While I agree that Schmeckebier often does not back up his conclusions with facts, in many cases he provides the only source of information on specific aspects of Curry's life. Given the artist's endorsement and personal contributions to the book through letters, photographs, and interviews, I have chosen to use it along with other sources to provide a more comprehensive view of Curry's life.

¹⁵ As cited in Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 179

¹⁶ Theodore F. Wolff, "John Steuart Curry: A Critical Assessment," In *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*. Patricia Junker, ed. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 82-83

¹⁷ Curry, "What should the American Artist Paint," In *John Steuart Curry: A Portrait of Rural America*. Joseph S. Czestochowski, ed. (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1981), 40

¹⁸ Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 205

¹⁹ Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 62

²⁰ Curry, "Address before the Art Association of Madison, Tuesday, 19 January 1937," Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm roll 165

²¹ For information for this paragraph and the following, I have drawn from Wolff in Junker, "John Steuart Curry: A Critical Assessment", 78-83

²² Wolff in Junker, "John Steuart Curry: A Critical Assessment.," 78

²³ Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 142

²⁴ Benton, *An American in Art*, 154

²⁵ Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 8

²⁶ Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 7

²⁷ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 8

²⁸ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 10

²⁹ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 8

³⁰ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Patricia Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," In *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*. Patricia Junker, ed. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 212

³¹ Radio Interview over WHA, 13 May 1938, Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm roll 165

³² Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 13

³³ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 213

³⁴ Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 213

³⁵ Information for this paragraph and the following was drawn from Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 214-215

³⁶ Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 20

³⁷ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 215

³⁸ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 215; Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 19-20

³⁹ Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 215

⁴⁰ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 216

⁴¹ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 37-38

⁴² Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 216

⁴³ As cited in Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 216

⁴⁴ Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 216

⁴⁵ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 215; Schmeckebeier, *Pageant*, 45

⁴⁶ Schmeckebeier, *Pageant*, 48

⁴⁷ Edward Alden Jewell, "Corcoran Gallery's 11th Exhibition," *New York Times*, 4 November 1928

⁴⁸ Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 217-218

⁴⁹ Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 218

⁵⁰ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Schmeckebeier, *Pageant*, 62

⁵¹ Benton himself confounds this point as he states in "John Curry," In *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*, Patricia Junker, ed. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 74 that he met Curry in 1926 at an Architectural League exhibition in New York. Another of the Missourian's writings, however, claims that he first met Curry in 1929 or 1930 (Benton, *An American in Art*, 151). For the purposes of this thesis, the exact date of their first meeting is not as vital as the fact that the two artists did know each other and were in close communication by 1930. For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Benton, *An Artist in America*, 151-155

⁵² For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Benton, *An Artist in America*, 152, 154

⁵³ For information for this paragraph and the following, I have drawn from Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 219, 221

⁵⁴ Benton, "John Curry," 74; Craven, "U.S. Scene," 24-25

⁵⁵ As cited in Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 221

⁵⁶ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 221; Schmeckebeier, *Pageant*, 62-63

⁵⁷ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 221-222; Schmeckebeier, *Pageant*, 63

⁵⁸ "Circus Troupe to View Art of Sawdust Ring," *New York Herald Tribune*, 29 March 1933 as cited in Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 222

⁵⁹ According to James M. Dennis, *Grant Wood: A Study in American Art and Culture*, (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1986), 144, Wood and Curry met in the summer of 1932 when Curry went to Stone City to visit Wood's artist colony. This information, however, is not substantiated in Junker's comprehensive chronology of Curry's life, nor have I found it in other sources. However, according to Benton, *An American in Art*, 151-152, the Missourian met Wood in 1934. Considering that Benton and Curry had known each other for several years at this point, it seems likely that whoever met Wood first would have introduced the Iowan to the other shortly after meeting him. For the purposes of this thesis, it is important to note only that the three were working together by the mid 1930's and that Curry visited Wood to help teach at his summer artists' colony in Stone City, Iowa by 1933.

⁶⁰ Charles C. Aldridge, "Prairie Prodigal: John Steuart Curry and Kansas," In *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*. Patricia Junker, ed. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 97

⁶¹ Margaret Curry Weakley and Mired Curry Fake, *The Alpha Xi Delta*, Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm roll 164; Lucy J. Matthias, "A Stranger to the Ivory Tower: John Steuart Curry and the University of

Wisconsin.” In *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*. Patricia Junker, ed. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 186

⁶² Craven, “U.S. Scene,” 24, 25

⁶³ Junker, “The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology,” 226

⁶⁴ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 76; M. Sue Kendall, “Alien Corn: An Artist on the Middle Border” In *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*. Patricia Junker, ed. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 174-175.

⁶⁵ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, “The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology,” 227, 234

⁶⁶ “Curry is Named ‘Artist in Residence’; Wisconsin Acts to Aid ‘Rural Culture.’” *New York Times*, 20 September 1936

⁶⁷ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Chris L. Christensen, Statement given in Madison, Wisconsin, 4 December 1936. Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm roll 165

⁶⁸ While promoting his ideas on American regionalism might not have been his explicit goal in accepting these commissions, such wide-spread display of his work undoubtedly helped popularize Regionalism.

⁶⁹ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, “The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology,” 230

⁷⁰ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Curry, Description of Murals for Kansas State Capitol,” Undated typescript [November 1937]. Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm roll 165

⁷¹ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, “The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology,” 231-232

⁷² Junker, “The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology,” 232

⁷³ As cited in Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 85

⁷⁴ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, “The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology,” 232-234

⁷⁵ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Curry to Reeves Lewenthal, 14 March 1941, Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm roll 165; Curry, “Description of Murals for Kansas State Capitol,” Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm roll 165, typescript 2; Although sources differ on the history of the murals after 1942, they are currently located in the East and West wings of the Kansas State Capitol in Topeka.

⁷⁶ Curry to Reeves Lewenthal, 14 March 1941, Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm roll 165

⁷⁷ Kendall, *Rethinking Regionalism*, 85

⁷⁸ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Junker, “The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology,” 235

⁷⁹ Benton in Czestochowski, “Afterword: On Regionalism, 1951,” 216

⁸⁰ Junker, “The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology,” 238

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- ⁸¹ Curry to Harry Wickey, 9 April 1946, Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm reel 165
- ⁸² Wolff in Junker, "John Steuart Curry: A Critical Assessment.," 80, 81
- ⁸³ Curry to the Milwaukee Art Institute, 1946, Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm roll 165
- ⁸⁴ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Wolff in Junker, "John Steuart Curry: A Critical Assessment.," 81
- ⁸⁵ Schmeckeber, *Pageant*, 221
- ⁸⁶ Wolff in Junker, "John Steuart Curry: A Critical Assessment.," 79-80
- ⁸⁷ Benton, *An American in Art*, 154
- ⁸⁸ Benton, *An American in Art*, 154
- ⁸⁹ Schmeckeber, *Pageant*, 50
- ⁹⁰ Benton, *An American in Art*, 154
- ⁹¹ In this mural for the Department of the Interior, Curry depicts the historic rush into the Oklahoma territory in which settlers hurried to stake their claim to the new land. Upon close examination, viewers can see that Curry incorporated many small, subtle jokes in this work. On one side, for instance, an individual whose wagon has crashed is rushing away from his wife and son to mark his land with three, rather than four stakes. On the other side of the mural, the artist jokingly made a reference to his name through the "Curry Wagon Works" sign that marks the side of an open wagon carrying a frightened woman with a terrified cat.
- ⁹² Schmeckeber, *Pageant*, 208
- ⁹³ Henry Adams, "Space, Weather, Myth, and Abstraction in the Art of John Steuart Curry," In *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West*. Patricia Junker, ed. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998), 118
- ⁹⁴ Adams in Junker, "Space, Weather, Myth, and Abstraction in the Art of John Steuart Curry," 117
- ⁹⁵ Adams in Junker, "Space, Weather, Myth, and Abstraction in the Art of John Steuart Curry," 122
- ⁹⁶ Margaret Curry to John Curry, undated, Curry Papers/AAA, microfilm reel 165; Adams in Junker, "Space, Weather, Myth, and Abstraction in the Art of John Steuart Curry," 122. In Adams' article, he cites a film entitled "Significant Tornadoes, 1680-1991" which appears to have pinpointed the tornado described by Curry's mother as one that occurred on 1 May 1930.
- ⁹⁷ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Schmeckeber, *Pageant*, 142
- ⁹⁸ Schmeckeber, *Pageant*, 133
- ⁹⁹ Schmeckeber, *Pageant*, 139
- ¹⁰⁰ For information for this paragraph, I have drawn from Adams in Junker, "Space, Weather, Myth, and Abstraction in the Art of John Steuart Curry," 113-114
- ¹⁰¹ Benton, *An American in Art*, 152
- ¹⁰² Junker, "The Life and Career of John Steuart Curry: an Annotated Chronology," 215

¹⁰³ Robert L. Gambone, "The Use of Religious Motifs in Curry's Art.," In *John Steuart Curry: Inventing the Middle West.*, Patricia Junker, ed. (New York: Hudson Hills Press, 1998) 134-149.

¹⁰⁴ For information for this paragraph and the following paragraph, I have drawn from Gambone in Junker, "The Use of Religious Motifs in Curry's Art.," 144

¹⁰⁵ Information from this paragraph were gleaned from Gambone in Junker, "The Use of Religious Motifs in Curry's Art.," 144

¹⁰⁶ Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 51

¹⁰⁷ Edward Alden Jewell, "Corcoran Gallery's 11th Exhibition," *New York Times*, 4 November 1928

¹⁰⁸ Gambone in Junker, "The Use of Religious Motifs in Curry's Art.," 137

¹⁰⁹ Information from this paragraph was drawn from Kendall in Junker, "Alien Corn: An Artist on the Middle Border," 176 and Park, Marlene "Lynching and Anti-Lynching: Art and Politics in the 1930s." In *The Social and The Real: Political Art of the 1930s in the Western Hemisphere.* Alejandro Anreus, Diana L. Linden, and Jonathan Weinberg, eds. (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 163, 172. It is interesting to note that just five months after the opening of this exhibit, Curry was invited to paint the Topeka murals which included the controversial John Brown image discussed in Chapter I. Given the close timing of the two and Curry's repeated demonstrations of sympathy for anti-lynching campaigns, it seems logical to conclude that the *Tragic Prelude* was meant, on some level, to be more of a social commentary than Curry admitted in his letters to Lewenthal. The religious symbolism of both of the images is also an interesting similarity, as *The Fugitive* features obvious tributes to Christ images, while John Brown of *Tragic Prelude* echoes traditional images of Old Testament prophets such as Moses.

¹¹⁰ Information from this paragraph was taken from Benton, *An American in Art*, 154-155

¹¹¹ Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 264-265

¹¹² Benton, *An American in Art*, 154

¹¹³ Schmeckebier, *Pageant*, 91